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Birney's Makings (Earle Birney's Ghost in the Wheels)

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GHOST IN THE WHEELS by Earle Birney. Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1977, Pp. 159. $4.95, pb.

Ghost in the Wheels is yet another selection of Earle Birney's poems. It comes two years after the handsomely bound and boxed two-volume *Collected Poems* of 1975, and is a much shorter assemblage — a little less than a hundred poems. However, it is obviously Birney's own selection of the poems he likes best — "none I think great and none I hope bad," as he wryly adds. He adds also that "Anything missing here and not in the *Collected Poems* is either sunk without trace or floating about waiting for a boat." In other words, all Birney's published poems will be found either here or in the *Collected*, and in fact there are only — in this volume — three poems written after 1973, and only four poems not included in the *Collected*, all of them late love poems, gravely gay (to restore its true meaning to that much abused word) and sweet in the manner of the year's last strawberries:

Sit straight dear twenty-six
hold firm the blade you've made
Mine dips with yours however frayed

With luck and will we'll reach
at last some bronzed arbutus beach
From there you'll sail the world

Give my old paddle then a simple burning
Sift the ashes down
where fish and weed are turning

But today sweet twenty-six
rest your eyes from the current's shine
loose your small palms for the coursing
let them find mine
("On Her Twenty-sixth Birthday")

Birney accompanies these poems with a brief preface, in which — as always — he notes that critics have misunderstood him and have not allowed for the inventive element in poems that — like "David" — sound personal — have not, in other words, reckoned with the

difference between the poet in the act of experiencing and the poet in the act of imaginative transformation. It is a valid plea, though one may justly wonder whether — in the guerrilla war that Birney has carried on for so many years with his reviewers — he has not sometimes missed those occasions when a perceptive critic will detect a nuance of true meaning that misses the poet when he becomes his own reader.

Apart from some interesting accounts of the genesis of particular poems, like "Bangkok Boy," "Meeting of Strangers," and "Twenty-third Flight," Birney's preface also contains the announcement that he no longer wishes to be called a *poet*, but a *maker*, and that he prefers his poems themselves should be described as *makings*. In a way this is merely substituting an Anglo-Saxon for a Graeco-Latin word of the same meaning, since *poet* derives ultimately from the Greek word for *maker*.

Yet there is more than a perverse pedantry at work here. First of all, in recent years there has been a resurgence of the romanticist image of the poet, as exemplified in showmen like Irving Layton and Leonard Cohen, which many who engage in the craft of poetry — and perhaps Birney among us — have found repellent and, worse, extremely boring. It is time to downgrade the image of the roaring poet so that the poetry can be read and judged in silence.

Then, in the description of poems as makings, there is something especially appropriate to Birney's way of working. For he has never regarded a poem, once put into print, as an inviolable art object. In fact he does not seem to regard a poem of his as finally completed while he himself remains active, but rather as a work in the process of becoming which the maker is entitled to change as he himself changes. And so there are some of Birney's poems, appearing first in early collections like *The Strait of Anian* thirty years ago, which have gone through many changes over the years. The process is indicated in the dates at the end of the poems that appear in the *Collected* and also in *Ghost in the Wheels*. In some cases the time span is enormous. "Once High upon a Hill" was begun in San Francisco in 1930, but the version we now have was completed in 1970, forty years later; in the process it has changed from a poem about recent experience to a poem of distant memory, its whole tone and perspective altered and its viewpoint enriched by the depth of time. "David," on the other hand, is a poem whose form was set by the many anthologizings that seemed to make it the property of the readers rather than of the poet, and this work has not been changed at all since it was written in 1940. Now, in 1977, it seems as though Birney regards the canon of his work as finally

set, for none of the poems which received their last revision for inclusion in the *Collected* of 1975 shows any sign of having been further changed.

What is the significance of this revisionist urge in terms of Birney's achievement? Has it really involved a progression in his art as a poet? I think not. Some of his finest poems remain among his earliest and unchanged works, like "Bushed" and "From the Hazel Bough" and "The Road to Nijmegen." And I find it interesting that the poems which I still admire most in rereading them in *Ghost in the Wheels* were all written over short periods — two years at most — and were not later changed: poems like "Mappemounde," "Ellesmereland I," such splendid travel pieces as "A Walk in Kyoto," "The Bear on the Delhi Road" and "El Greco: *Espolio*," and the magnificent meditation, perhaps the best of Birney's poems and one of the best of all Canadian poems, "November Walk near False Creek Mouth." Some other poems, on my rereading them after two years, seemed better than I had first thought, notably "Man on a Tractor" and "The Ebb Begins from Dawn"; these too, I found, did not appear to have been materially changed since first writing.

If one can judge from such a reaction, it would seem that Birney's best poems were those stirred by an inspiration strong enough for them to be quickly completed, and those which allowed themselves to be worked on over the years were and remain the less successful. Perhaps one can go further, and say that the really effective Birney poems seem to be those motivated by a physical or emotional experience that is unrepeatable, and that the less effective are the intellectual ones to which much thought has been given and which involve tricky and deliberate intellectual structures, like "Alaska Passage," "Window Seat," etc., where the visual aspect of the poem on the page becomes more important than the sound or than the visual images it arouses in the inner mind. Birney rarely goes all the way with the concrete poets, but he goes far enough in some poems to negate the wonderful natural lyricism, the melancholic or sometimes joyful irony, and the satiric anger that are his best qualities.

How does *Ghost in the Wheels* stand as a late selection — which one imagines is meant as a definitive one — of Birney's lifelong poetic output? It seems to me at least as good as anyone else might make. All the very good poems are there (the score or so that are needed to make a major poet), and enough of the rest to represent the experiences that have been imaginatively significant to Birney and also the changes in his craftsmanship that have taken place over the years. Looking back at the *Collected* I found less than a dozen poems I might have added

to make *Ghost in the Wheels* a satisfying volume, and none of them seemed absolutely necessary. Birney may sustain his ritual antagonism to the critics, but in this selection he shows himself a first-rate self-critic.

Certainly Birney's hope that none of these poems is *bad* is vindicated; one wishes every Canadian poet had been as sensitively selective in presenting his work. His thought that none of them is "great" may be more open to question. Greatness is in practice a relative term — relative to the temporal and the cultural contexts. Are great works the works that survive? Are they the works that in their time reflect most successfully what is best in their creator's culture? Possibly both aspects enter in, since works irrelevant to their time and place rarely emerge to stand among the enduring writings. Birney, there is no doubt, has been one of the Canadian poets whose work has been remarkable in its own right and also significant in its sensitivity to the Canadian setting and to Canadian attitudes. I would suggest, then, that his best poems are great by both standards; they are likely to be remembered as long as anything written at this time and place, and they are significant as reflections of the mind of a notable Canadian who has never been insular in his loyalties: who has indeed made the world his pearly and productive oyster.

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